THE MORALITY OF CRITICISM AND THE RESPECT OF PERSONS

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ABSTRACT

This is a paper in normative moral philosophy, addressing the problem of the respect of persons regarding the activity of criticism. The question is whether the activity of criticism should be considered a moral duty or simply a moral choice? If it is a moral duty, the further question is what, when, and how should we criticize someone if we are required by the moral law to respect persons? I discuss six potential arguments regarding this question, and argue that only one of them is satisfactory and should be set as the standard or the foundation of the morality of criticism. That is, we should criticize someone with the motive of love. I also argue that the criticism virtue would be possible only under the principle of moral particularism, in which this paper means the idea that we all have different roles in fulfilling our moral duties which are the same for everyone, and these different roles are determined by the actual identity of the person.

Keywords: morality, criticism, love, moral particularism

Prajñā Vihāra Vol. 19 No 2, July - December 2018, 57-70

Introduction: Moral Philosophy vs. Political Philosophy

How we should criticize one another? Are there moral guidelines for personal criticism? According to liberal political philosophy, individuals should be able to criticize someone as they want, given that they do not harm others physically. The respect of persons, according to this view, is simply the protection of persons from any physical violence, or as we all know it as the harm principle. Some contemporary liberals may further argue that hate speech should be added to the harm principle, and should be prohibited by law. But this paper will limit itself to moral philosophy rather than political philosophy. The difference is that while the former asks the question of what, when, and how individuals should behave in a particular situation, the latter only asks what individuals should do in their private sphere.

We often accept that individuals should be able to criticize someone; given that they do not harm others physically or engage in hate speech. But we may also argue that we should be careful not to criticize someone at all. The respect of persons in political sense is simply that we do not harm others according to law, but the law does not require that we must respect them. Under the law, we may hate and criticize others for the sake of our benefits, and exploit them in the sense that we view and treat them as our enemies or competitors.

In other words, the respect of persons in the political sense is to abide by the law (the harm principle) imposed on every individual only in the public sphere, not in private sphere. But the respect of persons in moral sense is much more than that. Sometimes we may be required by the moral law to view and treat someone not as a means but as an end in themselves. Therefore, respect of persons in moral sense is much more demanding and complicated than that of political sense. The main question of this paper is this: what, when, and how should we criticize someone if we are required by the moral law to respect persons?

This paper consists of two sections. The first section is morality of criticism. I will argue that there are six *main* meanings and practices, and only one of them is satisfactory. The second section will argue that

even though criticism is a virtue and duty of individuals, this virtue should be perceived through moral particularism, that treats individuals not as individuals as such but as particular persons with certain identity, rather than consider them in an abstract sense.

Section I The Foundation of the Morality of Criticism

Kantian moral theory teaches us to treat other people as ends in themselves. For instance, Kant (1797) argues that we do not respect persons as an ends in themselves if we lie to them even for the sake of the greater good; to lie to them is to use them as a means. To treat one another morally we do not need to take other persons' ends into account at all; instead we are simply required to respect their capacities of choices or ends; we are required by the moral law to help and assist other people not because doing so would help them fulfill the good life in one way or another, but because doing so would fulfill our own moral duty required by the moral law.

Even though Kant talks about a good will, this does not mean that everyone who has a good will must help others for the sake of helping them achieve the good life but must help others for the sake of the moral law itself. We may be motivated to help others by our sense of sympathy or any other motivations, but the only motive required for the moral law is duty to the moral law itself. Kant does not argue that a person with a good will must abandon his or her sense-based motives (e.g. love, sympathy, etc.) at all, but that a person with a good will must always be motivated by the moral duty itself, while other sense-based motives are simply our own moral choices rather than moral duties, as Kant writes that "it is very beautiful to do good to human beings from love for them and from compassionate benevolence, or to be just from love of order; but this is not yet our conduct's genuine moral maxim appropriate to our station among rational beings *as human beings*, when with proud conceit we presume – as volunteers, as it were – to brush aside the thought of duty and, as independent of command, to want to do merely from our own pleasure what we would need no command to do."

In contrast, communitarian moral theory, drawing overwhelmingly from Sandel's thought, teaches us that the respect of persons is to take their choices and ends into account seriously. We should support others to fulfill their ends if it leads them to the good life, and we should discourage them if it does not. According to this view, we are required by the moral law to help others not only with the motive to respect the moral law itself, but also with other motives such as sympathy, love, and commitment; these motivations are not simply our choices but our moral duties in the first place; we must respect other people not only for the sake of the moral law itself, but also for the sake of the good life of those others.

Another moral theory is what I would call a "utilitarian" moral theory. Utilitarianism" usually refers to the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, which argues that the right thing to do is to maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest number in the short term (Bentham) and in the long term (Mill), my choice of naming a moral theory I will discuss shortly as utilitarian moral theory may be not a good choice because what I mean by "utilitarian" here simply refers to the idea that we should do things for the sake of our own utility rather than the utility of others. According to utilitarian moral theory in my own term, we are required by the moral law to respect persons only to the extent that we do not harm them physically, but we are free to treat them merely as a means for our own ends; we may respect other people simply for the sake of the good life of ourselves.

Now the question is what we can learn from the three moral theories above? I would propose that what we can learn from them is that there are three motives regarding the respect of persons: (1) to respect persons is to act for the sake of the moral law itself (Kantian moral theory), (2) to respect persons is to act for the sake of the good life of those persons themselves (Communitarian moral theory), and (3) to respect persons is to act for the sake of the utility of ourselves, given that we do not harm others physically (Utilitarian moral theory). And there are two options (actions) regarding criticism: (1) to ignore or not criticize other persons, and (2) to criticize other persons. For the sake of simplicity, I summarize all of these in the following figure:

	Actions	Motives
Kantian Moral Theory	(1) To ignore persons	For the sake of the moral law itself
	(2) To speak our minds	For the sake of the moral law itself
Communitarian Moral Theory	(3) To ignore persons	For the sake of the good life of others
	(4) To speak our minds	For the sake of the good life of others
Utilitarian Moral Theory	(5) To ignore persons	For the sake of the utility of ourselves
	(6) To speak our minds	For the sake of the utility of ourselves

Now we have six actions regarding the activity of criticism, inspired by three moral theories. I will discuss these six actions in turn, and argue that only action (4) is satisfactory and required by the moral law. However it should be clear that this does not mean that those thinkers (such as Kant, Sandel, and so on) actually support my arguments, but I simply borrow their ideas to lay out the framework of my arguments. For example, when I argue that Kantian moral theory supports action (1) and (2), I do not mean that Kant actually thinks so or explicitly says as I would argue; instead I simply want to show how, according to the *logic* of Kant's argument on the respect of persons, his moral thinking can be applied to the question of the morality of criticism.

Let's begin with action (1): we are required by the moral law to ignore other persons choices for the sake of the moral law itself. The reasoning is that a good will requires us to respect *any* choices other people make, regardless of whether those choices are really good for themselves; if we criticize them about the way they choose or their choices themselves, then we use them as a means for our ends because

we use our own particular conception of the good as the criterion to judge other people's ends. For example, if someone asks us if his or her dress is beautiful, then, according to the logic of action (1), we should say neither because giving our opinion is to use our own criterion to judge other people's choices and to not respect their capacity of choice. We are doing more than what the moral law requires us to do.

Action (2) argues that we are required by the moral law to speak our minds regarding other persons choices for the sake of the moral law itself. The logic of this argument is this: a good will requires us to respect our own thinking, regardless of whether and how our thinking would affect other people's sentiments and even our own utility. According to this view, to respect persons is to treat them as an ends in themselves rather than as a means, and to speak our minds is to speak the truth, and to speak the truth is to treat them as an ends rather than as a means for our own ends. For instance, if someone asks us if his or her dress is beautiful, then, according to the logic of action (2), we should say that it is beautiful only if we really think so, and that it is not only if we do not really think so. We speak the truth according to our real thinking *not* because we want to hurt or please them for our own benefit or even for their own benefit, but because we want to respect the moral law that dictates to us to speak our minds. We show the respect to other persons only if we speak the truth so that other persons would know what we really think of them; they would not feel that they are being used by us for other ends.

Action (3) argues that we are required by the moral law not to criticize others for their decisions because only they know what will lead to the good life for them. The logic of this argument is this: the respect of persons is not only to respect their capacity of choice but also their choices themselves; we must think that, whatever are their choices, they always choose the good for themselves. For example, if someone asks us if his or her dress is beautiful, then, according to the logic of action (3), we should not give an opinion. This argument differs from action (1) suspends judgement to obey the moral law itself; while action (3) suspends judgement concerning others' choices.

Action (4) argues that we are required by the moral law to speak our minds regarding other persons for the sake of the good life of those persons. The logic of this argument is this: we should respect other persons by encouraging them to live the good life and preventing them from any choices that would undermine their good lives. In this view, sometimes we should speak our minds along with encouraging them to be confident on their own choices only if their confidence on those choices contribute to the good life. For instance, if someone asks us if his or her dress is beautiful, then, according to the logic of action (4), we should say that it is beautiful or not only if we really think so. We are motivated by our sympathy and desire to see them live the good life. One may question if why we could not do this in action (2)? The answer is that because action (2) argues that we should do things for the sake of the moral law itself, while other motivations are simply our choices rather than our moral duties, so action (2) does *not* compel us to say that he or she should be confident on his or her choice of dress; we may choose to say it but it is not required by the moral law. In contrast, action (4) compels us to both speak our minds and be sympathetic with other persons; the motivation of sympathy is our moral duty rather than our free choice.

Action (5) argues that we are not required by the moral law, and we are free to ignore other persons for the sake of the utility of ourselves. The logic of this argument is this: given that we do not harm other people physically, we are free to use others as a means for our own ends, and we should ignore others because this is an efficient way to gain the highest utility for ourselves.

Action (6) argues that we are not required by the moral law, and we are free to speak our minds regarding other persons for the sake of the utility of ourselves. The logic of this argument is this: given that we do not harm other people physically, we are free to use others as a means for our own ends, and we should criticize others because this is an efficient way to gain the highest utility for ourselves. We feel happy when criticizing others, whether or not our criticism is beneficial to those people, or to society as a whole. As long as we do not harm them physically, we should

be able to do so.

I have discussed all six arguments. Now I will show why only action (4) is satisfactory and compatible with the respect of persons and should be set as the standard of the moral law regarding criticism (the morality of criticism). What makes our action moral or immoral depend on the combination of the right action and our motives: Doing the right thing for the right reason [Morality = (right) Action + (right) Motive].

A motive is a right reason. Our action can be moral only if we convey certain reason to it. In this sense motive is indispensable for our moral actions since we cannot do the right thing for the wrong reason/ motive. The question is what is the right motive to respect persons regarding the activity of criticism? I have discussed three different motives: the motive to respect the moral law itself, the motive to love other people, and the motive to love ourselves. As we can see that the motive to love ourselves is not, indeed, required by the moral law, but it is rather our free choice, this motive is not the right motive/reason that makes criticism moral in the first place. According to this motive, there is no such thing as a morality of criticism because everyone is free to convey any reason to criticism; in other words, there is no foundation of the morality of criticism in the first place. Apart from that, this motive also uses people as a means for our own ends, which is clearly incompatible with the respect of persons. According to action (5), we simply do not criticize other people not because we really admire their choice nor even respect their capacity of choice, but because we treat them as a source of our own utility; we do not treat them as a person but as a thing we can use for our own ends. It would be very odd to suggest that this motive should become the moral law or morality of criticism because if this is the case, then the notion that everyone is an end in themself and deserves our respect would be replaced by the notion that everyone is merely a means to be used and underserving of our respect.

Let's consider our relationship to someone who has irrational or even destructive beliefs in the supernatural. Should we criticize their beliefs and choices? According to the motive of action (1), we would

keep silent because we do not want to undermine their autonomy, so we would rather leave them alone. According to the motive of action (2), we would be required to criticize them by the moral law to tell them the truth, despite this may make them feel bad. I do not think that these two actions (1 and 2) should become the standard of the morality of criticism because even though they aim to respect persons as an ends in themselves, their understanding and perception of the person is too abstract: they exclude consideration of all ends of the individual person.

In other words, they simply respect persons as pure and abstract individuals rather than as emotional and concrete individuals who are motivated by different desires, different conceptions of the good life, and different social positions. The great difference is that while the respect of persons as abstract individuals gives us the feeling that we are respected only because we are simply abstract human beings, the respect of persons as concrete individuals gives us the feeling that we are respected because we are unique and *different* from others. I would argue that only the second meaning gives true respect to persons.

I propose that the right motive of criticism must be the motive of love. At first glance, this proposal seems paradoxical because criticism seems to be the activity that makes someone feel bad, while love seems to be the activity that makes someone feel good. How could we criticize someone with the motive of love? I propose that this is possible only if we embrace the meaning of love in a deeper sense: to love someone is to wish them the good life. This definition of love is not to make someone feel good and stronger in a short term, but to encourage them to pursue the good life. Therefore it is necessary to criticize someone when we see that they are deviating from the good life. And we can know whether someone is deviating from the good life only if we know what the good life of a particular person is, and we must take their unique ends and interests into account. We cannot take their interests and ends into account seriously if we do not love them first, as Frankfurt (2004, p.37) argues that "loving someone or something essentially *means* or *consists in*, among other things, taking its interests as reasons for acting to serve those interests.

Love is itself, for the lover, a source of reasons. It creates the reasons by which his acts of loving concern and devotion are inspired."

In this sense, action (3) and (4) come closer to the morality of criticism as they assert that the motive of criticism (or not criticism) is our love and sympathy with other people. Their perception of the person is significantly different from action (1) and (2) in that they aim to respect not only the (pure) self but also their ends and goals. However, I would argue that only action (4) is compatible with the morality of criticism. According to action (3), we should not criticize someone even if we want to because if we do so, then we would undermine their good life as we believe that anything they choose and pursue is always good for them. In contrast, according to action (4), we should criticize someone if we see that he or she is doing something harmful to his or her good life; in this view, it is possible that someone else might know better than us about the good life of ourselves.

Section II The Criticism Virtue and Moral Particularism

In the last section I have argued that the morality of criticism must be based on the motive to love other people, and take his or her interests and ends into account seriously before we criticize them. In this sense we not only love individuals as such but also recognize them as emotional and concrete individuals. The problem is that we are required by the moral law to treat *equally.* But this is impossible in theory and practice. While it is easy to see the practical difficulties, I will focus on the *theoretical* difficulties of treating everyone equally. The identity of the person is crucial, and the moral theory I would like to introduce for this task is what I call "moral particularism."

Moral particularism is often interpreted as the idea that there is no such thing as a universal moral principle; instead different communities have different understandings of what the morality is, so each community has its own standard of morality; a particular action may be a virtue in a particular community but may be a vice in another particular community. However, in this paper, I do not use "moral particularism" that way; instead

what I mean by "moral particularism" is generally the idea that we all have different roles in fulfilling our moral duties which are the same for everyone, and these different roles are determined by the actual identity of the person, including our community.

My argument is that there are two orders of morality: the *first-order* morality is concerned about the question of "what is the right thing to do?" and the *second-order* morality is the question of "whom should we do the right thing to in particular?" For instance, the first-order morality may tell us that we have moral duty to help others, and the second-order morality may further tell us that our moral duty to help others is in our own communities. It is important to understand that moral particularism, is a second-order morality, while criticizing someone with a motive of love is a first-order. So I would propose that we should use our *more* energy to criticize someone who is closer to us in terms of commitment and identity in a *particular situation* than to someone else who is *more* distant from us.

It is noteworthy that a "particular situation" is a keyword here. Without it, we may mistakenly think that we must always do the right thing only to those who are closer to us, which surely causes a conceptual confusion because there is *no* universal criterion that tells us who else is closer to us. This can be family, neighbors, nationals, etc. Eventually this will lead to the failure of the moral duty unless we introduce a standard of judgement: we can know to whom we should have *more* moral duty with only if we know the *situation* we are encountering at the moment.

For example, if we are in a situation where we are required by the moral law to help two drowning children, one is our own child, another is not, the question is, given that we have time and capacity to help only one child, who should we help first? According to the second-order morality, our moral duty should go first to our own child because of his or her closer commitment and identity to us; in this case we cannot claim either that our moral duty would be equally urgent to both of them or that our moral duty should go first to someone else who is even closer to us than our own child because someone else is out of our particular situation at

the moment. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should help only our own children; in fact, we are required by the moral law to help them all, but our moral duty to our own child is more urgent and demanding than that to another child.

When it comes to the activity of criticism, we also must ask if, given that we cannot criticize everyone with the motive of love equally, who we should offer our criticism? One might question why we must we focus our criticism, rather than criticizing everyone equally? I would say that this is because the activity of criticism with the motive of love is something we need to put our much energy into it; we need to take interests and ends of the person we love into account seriously so that we can know what is good and what is bad for them, in which it is impossible to do for everyone.

Let's consider the love between parents and children. Parents who really love their children must take their children's interests and ends into account very seriously so that they can know what is good and what is bad for the life of their children. These parents may love children of their neighbors and also wish them the good life, but their moral duty to their own children must be more urgent and demanding. They are required to criticize their own children even if sometimes they know that doing so would make both them and their children hurt and disturbed, but as a good parent, they must do so with the motive of love.

Another good example would be the criticism of our own nation. It is mistakenly held by some nationalists and conservatives that we should not criticize our own nation as this *always* reflects the disrespect of our nation. I would argue that, indeed, just the opposite is true. It is not only possible but also necessary that we have a moral duty to criticize our own nation in several issues such as economics, politics, cultures, traditions, educations, and so on. This is based upon the motive of love.

The virtue of criticism is a moral duty; sometimes to fail to criticize someone is to fail to do our moral duty. Sometimes we may choose not to criticize our loved one just because we do not want to be criticized in return, but this may be a vice rather than a virtue because it suggests that we

love ourselves more than our loved one. Of course, as Frankfurt suggests, it is necessary to love ourselves more than everyone else, but sometimes we have to negotiate between the benefits our loved one would receive from our criticism and the costs we would receive from being criticized.

Recalling the main question of this paper: What, when, and how should we criticize someone if we are required by the moral law to respect persons in a moral sense? It is difficult to reduce such an argument to a simple statement, since as Hegel argues that philosophers need to show how exactly the development of philosophical ideas unfold. However, if I have to try, I would put it this way: We should criticize someone with the motive of love (how). We should criticize when we see others deviating from the good life (when), and we should offer them better alternatives (what).

Conclusion

This is a paper in normative moral philosophy rather than normative political philosophy, whatever suggestions and arguments I would propose in this paper is simply a moral suggestion rather than a political or legal suggestion. I have addressed the problem of the respect of persons regarding the activity of criticism. The question is if the activity of criticism should be a moral duty or simply a moral choice? and if it is a moral duty, the further question is what, when, and how should we criticize someone if we are required by the moral law to respect persons in a moral sense? I have discussed six potential arguments regarding this question, and argue that only one of them is satisfactory and should be set as the standard or the foundation of the morality of criticism. That is, we should criticize someone with the motive of love and wishes the person whom we criticize the good life. I have also argued that the criticism virtue would be possible only if we are governed by the principle of moral particularism, in which this paper means the idea that we all have different roles in fulfilling our moral duties which are the same for everyone, and these different roles are determined by the actual identity of the person.

ENDNOTES

[1] Kant, Fundamental Principles of The Metaphysic of Morals, p.107
[2] Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice, p.181
[3] Sandel, Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?, p.223

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